

Roberta Kerr

## **Country Roads: Reflections on Landscape and Memory**

Oral histories and other types of memoirs are a vital component of many of our archival collections. They often convey landscapes, literal and figurative, that become an intrinsic part of the memories that we preserve and pass on.

The Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta has received several archival donations from the estate of Dr. Alex and Gertie Belkin, who moved to Calgary in 1945. The writing of this piece, by one of their grandchildren, was inspired by a road trip suggested by their eldest daughter, Naomi (Buddy) Kerr.

The primary locations of this story are the traditional territory of the Cree, Sault-eaux, Nakota, Lakota, and Dakota Nations; the Métis Nation (Eastend, SK); the traditional territory of the Kainai, Piikani, Siksika, Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina Nations; and Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3 (Calgary, AB).

My mother was born in Eastend, Saskatchewan in November 1931.

Well, technically she was born in Winnipeg, where her mother had gone to spend the pre- and post-delivery “lying in” with her extended family. But technicality aside, my mother was a child of the prairies. We grew up taking long family road trips, and her fondness for an open prairie sky, her appreciation of the patchwork of farmers’ fields, and her delight in the surprise of a creek nestled at the base of a mid-grass rise became as much bred in my bones, as in hers. Two generations later, road trips through the prairies still regularly include a detour to Eastend to eat at Jack’s Café, go past the old house, stop at the school, and re-tell her stories, which we know as well as we know our own. In the summer of 2020, one last visit was at the top of her to-do list.

Eastend sits at the east end of the Cypress Hills, which stretch from southern Alberta into Saskatchewan. It was—and is—something of an area hub, situated alongside the Frenchman River, which flooded dramatically in 1952. The main road into town drops into the river valley, and on each return visit, for many decades now, Mom comments on how the descent’s not as steep as she remembers.

Her father, Alex, was a doctor. After graduating medical school in Winnipeg at the tender age of 23, he took a *locum tenens* position in Tomkins, Saskatchewan. The landscape and lifestyle suited him, and he subsequently took on a permanent position in Eastend, returning to Winnipeg only to marry his fiancée, Gertie. They settled happily into the rhythms of the small town, which then had a population of around 500. They played bridge and tennis, and were active members of the community, which included two—and for a time, three—Jewish families. Murray Robins and his sister, Mona (Robins) Joffe, also eventually moved to Calgary, and remained lifelong friends. They were also fortunate to have occasional visits from some of their Winnipeg relatives.



Buddy Belkin and her father, Alex;  
Eastend Bridge, 1936.

Mom had a happy childhood. She played in the river and on its banks, and roamed freely with her friends, on foot or by bicycle. She had received the bicycle for her birthday when she was six or seven. After dinner one night, her father asked if she'd like to go for a walk, and they went down to the pharmacy. Imagine her delight and surprise when the bicycle she saw there, with a large bow on it, turned out to be for her; a gift that her father had ordered from a catalogue and asked the pharmacist to put together. She learned to ride it in the large field east of town, though the bicycle was so big, it would be years before she grew into it.

My mother was very close to her dad. He had one of only a few vehicles in the area, and from a young age, she went with him when he did his rounds of the farm families. She was a thoughtful child—an only child until she was 6½—and she had an active imagination. As they drove, she would look out the window, and think about how big the prairies were, and how you could travel for days and days, with only the undulations of the land for company; she imagined what it must have been like for those who had travelled there before. She remembers the different animals they used to see, and had

a real fondness for the sheep who were always in the same corner of one particular farmyard. They were so white, and lay so still. It came as quite a surprise when she eventually realized that they were, in fact, not sheep at all, but very large rocks.

This realization came to her around the time she started school. Eastend had an elementary school and a high school, on a plot of land off Pottery Street on the north side of town, near the river. My mother remembers when a bad storm damaged the roof of the elementary school, and temporary space for the younger children was found in the bigger building. Lining up to go in each morning, she would stand up as tall as ever she could, so that people going by would think that she was, indeed, old enough to be in high school.



Buddy Belkin and her favourite uncle in front of the Belkin's Eastend home, c1937.

By the time she really was in high school, she wasn't in Eastend anymore. Alex had enlisted in the army not long after Canada entered the Second World War. He went to Regina for basic training, and when he was sent overseas Gertie took my mother and my aunt—who had been born in 1938—back to Winnipeg. When Alex returned to Canada in 1945, he was posted to the Colonel Belcher veteran's hospital in Calgary. Though my mother started Grade 9 in Winnipeg, the family moved west to join him just a few months later.

Mom finds it interesting that she doesn't remember much about the trip from Winnipeg to Calgary. All that has stuck with her is standing at the train window, nose pressed to the glass, itching for the mountains to come into view. She'd only ever seen them in pictures, or read about them in books, and she couldn't wait for the real thing. The idea that they'd soon be living close enough to actually go there — well, there really were no words. The family's first mountain road trip took place the

following spring. They went with a friend, who amazed my mother by knowing the heights of all the peaks. It was some time before she realized that he was just reading the little roadside signs.



Two of Buddy's grandchildren on the porch of the old house, 1995.

She was aware from the start of a curious phenomenon, a trick of perception that sometimes made the mountains seem so close, and sometimes so far. Seeing them in person, she understood what made people think, so incorrectly, that they could just walk there from the city and be back in time for dinner. She imagined—much as she had done in Eastend—what it would have been like to have travelled there by foot, on horseback, or by wagon, especially in winter. She has visceral memories of the winters of her youth, especially the dry sharpness of the western prairie cold, so different from Winnipeg's humidity. And until she came to Calgary, and experienced the vagaries of its weather, she had never before had a birthday without snow on the ground.

There have since been many birthdays, some with snow and some without. My mother has lived a long, full life, and has frequently said how glad she is to have lived it in Calgary. She—like her parents before her—formed lifelong friendships and strong ties to her community. And she has always been surrounded by the land that shaped her: the pull of the endless prairie, rising and falling to the east; the river-banks and fields of her childhood playground; the alluring and elusive mountains, ever-present, to the west.

These are my mother's landscapes. She carries them with her, and has gifted them to us. And she is still, at age 89, always up for a ride in the country.



Buddy (Belkin) Kerr in the yard of Eastend School, August 2020.